

# Thomas Abernethy, Jesuit and Covenanter

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Thomas Abernethy received all the publicity of which a clamorous, pamphleteering age was capable when he signed the National Covenant—as a former Jesuit priest—on 24 August 1638 in what has been described by David Stevenson as “a great propaganda *coup* for the covenanters”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the subject of this discussion held centre stage at what was presented, even at the time, as one of the great events of Scottish history:

To sett off the great solemnity of this tacking the Covenant with greater grace, there was one Mr. Thomas Abernetthye (a new convert from popery, who laity had been a seminary priest) reserved. This Mr. Thomas Abernetthye was brought in publicke by Mr. Andrew Ramsey and a preface made concerning him, who was standing by in secular apperrall, who afterwards seconded Mr. Andrew Ramsey his discourse, and declared to the people how farr he had been missledd, and what great attempts the pope and his conclave had been and was acting against Scotland, and did as yet continew to acte; and now shewed, with teares, that he was a lost sheepe, and begged for to have the license for to subscrybe the Covenant, which was granted, and he was surrounded by the crowde of the devouter sexe present.<sup>2</sup>

Women “swore the Covenant but were not asked to sign it”;<sup>3</sup> apparently they took a particular interest in this reformed celibate who had served the Scarlet Woman of Babylon.

The description of the scene in Greyfriars Kirk is taken from *The History of Scots Affairs* by Gordon of Rothiemay, a commonly used historical source for the period, so it is a remarkable coincidence to find that Thomas Abernethy also came from the parish of Rothiemay in Banffshire. Gordon’s account implies that they knew one another: “Thereafter he got a benefice, and was commissioner at Glasgow, whereof I have his *diarium manuscriptum* in my hands.”<sup>4</sup> The records of the General Assembly which met in Glasgow during November and December 1638 offer no clue as

<sup>1</sup> D. Stevenson, “The National Covenant: a list of known copies”, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, xxiii (1988), 236.

<sup>2</sup> J. Gordon, *The History of Scots Affairs from 1637 to 1641* (Aberdeen, 1841), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Stevenson, “National Covenant”, 259.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon, *Scots Affairs*, i, 44.

to which parish the ex-Jesuit was given to serve as a Protestant minister. The outbreak of war deflected him from entering the pulpit in any case, and Abernethy was among the wounded when Montrose made his first entry to Aberdeen, as a Covenanter, on 17 June 1639. Here Gordon's report has tantalising gaps: "He was in armes as a souldier at the Bridg of Dee and gloried of a shot in his [blank] in Aberdeen [blank] at Rothemay of a perturbulent gentleman".<sup>5</sup> The mutilated manuscript does not reveal what Abernethy suffered from the perturbulent gentleman, but he cannot have been surprised at rough handling. Rothiemay was hardly a typical parish for the times but illustrates very well the troubled state of Scotland in the 1630s.

Thomas Abernethy was descended from the family of Mayen,<sup>6</sup> an estate lying east of the castle of Rothiemay which had passed from Abernethy to Gordon hands early in the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> A Gordon owner of that castle was to meet his death in the burning Tower of Frendraught. The dispute which led to a full privy council enquiry, trial and executions, began on New Year's Day 1630 when William Gordon, laird of Rothiemay, died after a skirmish with the supporters of William Crichton. Crichton was laird of Frendraught, four miles to the south-east. What had begun as an argument over fishing rights on the Deveron soon reached its climax in the deaths of John Gordon, the new laird of Rothiemay, and lord Melgum viscount Aboyne, second son to the marquis of Huntly. Soon after midnight on 8 October 1630 the tower in which Rothiemay and Aboyne were guests caught fire. Trapped by iron bars at the windows, they died with their servants.

The event had a religious dimension. When it became clear that there was no means of escape Aboyne persuaded Rothiemay, according to a Catholic source, "to abjure the heresie of Calvin, and mak the profession of the Catholik faith openly, to the hearing of the traitor and all who were with him in the court".<sup>8</sup> Among the witnesses in the courtyard was lady Frendraught and, it has been claimed,<sup>9</sup> her domestic chaplain: a "prest" named Anderson is certainly listed as part of the household<sup>10</sup> and he may have been the "busy trafficking papist" who died in the Edinburgh tolbooth

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 45, n.

<sup>7</sup> W. Cramond, *Rothiemay House* (Banff, 1900), 11.

<sup>8</sup> G. Blackhall, *A Brieffe Narration of the Services Done to Three Noble Ladyes* (Aberdeen, 1844), 125.

<sup>9</sup> G. Oliver, *Collections towards a Biography of the Scotch, English and Irish Members of the Society of Jesus* (London, 1845), quoted in Blackhall, *Brieffe Narration*, xxiv.

<sup>10</sup> J. Spalding, *Memorials of the Trubles in Scotland*, ii (Aberdeen, 1845), 382.

two years later.<sup>11</sup> Lady Frendraught appeared next day in front of the marquis of Huntly's castle at Bog of Gight, Speymouth, "busked in ane white plaid", with the chaplain leading her horse in the guise of a servant.<sup>12</sup> Huntly would not receive the woman who had already been accused of starting the fire, although as head of the Catholic party he had a chaplain of his own who was Jesuit superior of the mission to Scotland.

Religion aroused strong emotions in Rothiemay and the surrounding area of Strathbogie, with the Roman Catholic faith legally proscribed in Scotland but supported by the Cock of the North and at least some of his Gordon lairds and relations. As the Frendraught incident shows viscount Aboyne was an open Catholic (and the great hope of that party) but the laird of Rothiemay was not. A major theme in what follows is the ambivalence of landholders who tried to satisfy the demands of these two powerful forces, but this became harder once the Presbytery of Strathbogie became an effective agency of church government, backed by military force. Rothiemay came under the control of the Covenanting party in 1644, and although Montrose briefly recaptured the castle in the following year the Presbyterian party was soon in charge once more. In these circumstances, and particularly in this area, it was often the lady of the house who maintained Catholic practice with the aid of a domestic chaplain while the laird secured his property by conforming (at least occasionally) to the law's requirements on church attendance.<sup>13</sup>

Against this background of local history the divided religious allegiance of the Abernethys can be used to help explain the motivations of the Jesuit who was to turn Covenanter. The family was inclined to stand out against Huntly during the first stage of the Reformation. Mary Queen of Scots spent the night of 4 September 1562 as a guest of the Abernethys of Rothiemay, seven weeks before the Gordons received a double blow through the death of their leader at Corrichie and the execution of his son at Aberdeen.<sup>14</sup> Even in these early years of religious uncertainty Abernethy was prepared to resist the northern Catholic tendency. Although Rothiemay's castle and estate passed to the Gordons by purchase in 1617 the Abernethys remained influential in this part of Strathbogie. The ecclesiastical records show Abernethy elders at Auchinclech and Claymires (close to the castle of Rothiemay) in

<sup>11</sup> W. Forbes Leith, *Memoirs of Scottish Catholics during the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries*, i (London, 1909), 370.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, *Scots Affairs*, 1, 7.

<sup>13</sup> A. Roberts, "The role of women in Scottish Catholic survival", *Scottish Historical Review*, lxx (1991), 129-50.

<sup>14</sup> Charles, Marquis of Huntly, *Records of Aboyne, 1230-1681* (Aberdeen, 1894), 151.



1607<sup>15</sup> and again in 1650<sup>16</sup> demonstrating a steady commitment to Reformation principles. And in the south-east corner of the parish known as Turtory James Abernethy of Craighead was another of these “Elderis of auld”.<sup>17</sup> A son of any of these branches of the family might have been expected to sign the Covenant without hesitation.

It is not clear where the Mayen branch of the family lived, but if the Tower of Marnoch (at Tillydown on the edge of the Mayen estate) was still inhabited in the early 1600s<sup>18</sup> it may have been home to the future priest. A stronger possibility, however, is Barrie at the northern end of the parish. This branch of the family was close to the aristocratic main line<sup>19</sup> and the house was also quite near Ordiquhill, a place of Catholic pilgrimage which troubled church authorities early in the seventeenth century. Wherever he lived Thomas Abernethy of Barrie was almost certainly the priest’s father. Barrie’s first cousin Jean married the Catholic George Gordon, laird of Gicht, in 1627, and the long-term allegiance of this branch is demonstrated by an eighteenth-century reference in the register of the Scots College, Douai, to a son of “Margarita Abernethy filia Baronis de Barry”.<sup>20</sup>

But Thomas Abernethy says that he was “brought up of honourable parents, with a most religious Minister of God’s word, for the space of six years”.<sup>21</sup> This suggests a Protestant clergyman doubling as tutor in Latin, while leaving open the question of his parents’ faith. Huntly castle at Bog of Gight provides an example at the highest level of Catholic practice co-existing with this kind of tutor, in this case taken into the household at the behest of government but welcome enough in the name of classical education. Alexander Smart was minister of Rothiemay when Abernethy was a boy, although in 1627 he was suspended for marrying George Gordon to Jean Abernethy, both being open Catholics. One of Smart’s own daughters married yet another Abernethy who lived at Waulkmill on the Deveron boundary of the parish, and a second daughter went to live in Wick.<sup>22</sup> This introduces a first link with Caithness, where the future Jesuit was to undergo his change of heart. Caithness also draws attention to

<sup>15</sup> D. Shearer, *Notes Historical and Ecclesiastical on the Parish of Rothiemay* (Huntly, n.d.), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Spalding Club, *The Presbytery Book of Strathbogie* (Aberdeen, 1843), 165.

<sup>17</sup> Shearer, *Rothiemay*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> N. Q. Bogdan, and I. B. D. Bryce, *Scottish Castle Survey* (Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Fraser, Lord Saltoun, *The Frasers of Philorth* (Edinburgh, 1879), xviii.

<sup>20</sup> Spalding Club, *Records of the Scots Colleges* (Aberdeen, 1906), 80.

<sup>21</sup> T. Abernethie, *Abjuration of Poperie* (Edinburgh, 1638), 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ*, ed. H. Scott (Edinburgh, 1928), vi, 332.

the fact that the Abernethy family had Protestant ecclesiastical connections above the parish level, for in 1617 John Abernethy “brother to Abernethy of Mayen or Rothiemay”<sup>23</sup> was consecrated bishop of that northern diocese. Taking the Abernethys of Rothiemay as a whole, it is clear that the Jesuit/Covenanter came from a family which was already divided.

Born about 1600, Thomas Abernethy took up military service in Germany (like more than 20,000 Scotsmen in the first half of the seventeenth century) and was present at the outset of one of the world’s great ideological conflicts, the Thirty Years’ War. He bore arms on the Protestant side and appears to have served under Mansfield until the collapse of the Protestant forces at Freisoythe in December 1623. He then claims to have undergone a first formal religious conversion, although he can hardly have been unfamiliar with Roman Catholic practice in Scotland: “I who had exposed my life in the wars, to all hazards to which that calling is subject, sundrie years in Germanie for the overthrow of Poperie, was not a year out of the wars, till in my travels through Italie I was made a prey in Florence, by an English Jesuit called Thomson or Gerard, both to his religion and profession”.<sup>24</sup> Appropriately for a war weary soldier, he agreed to join the Order which had been founded by Ignatius Loyola in the previous century. There must have been an element of choice between family religious allegiances, and Abernethy was later to accuse himself of intellectual pride:

I imployed more my understanding to learning, then my will to pietie, attending rather to become a good scholler then a good Christian, conferring more on Aristotle, and his followers, then with Christ and his Apostles. I have sinned by curiositie, exposing my self in forraine Countries, especially in Italie, to occasions in conference, and disputing with the Jesuits, who knew cunninglie how to circumveene me, and can work their own ends; I have sinned by weake and inconstant facilitie, yeelding too soon to their alluring delusions.<sup>25</sup>

In 1624 he entered the Scots College, Rome, and quickly went on from there into the Jesuit novitiate. During the later stages of Europe’s most highly-regarded system of education Abernethy spent seven years in France studying philosophy and divinity.<sup>26</sup> An account of the process of recruitment and induction is given in his own report on Jesuit strategies:

<sup>23</sup> J. B. Craven, *A History of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Caithness* (Kirkwall, 1908), 63.

<sup>24</sup> Abernethie, *Abjuration*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Of our nation, out of the country, there be five colleges or seminaries, Rome in Italy, Paris in France, Douay in Flanders, Madrid in Spain, Brunsberg in Prussia. In their colleges, youth are brought up in their discipline, throughout all their humanity, philosophy, and divinity. Their colleges are furnished with scholars by the Jesuits residing in their several countries, some by their popish parents, some under promises of great learning, some seduced by Jesuits and priests in the countries and abroad, some for poverty; all of the quickest and best wits that the Jesuits can find out amongst many that are propounded to them for that use. . . . Their youths, after they have maintained three months in any college, they make a vow to take on priesthood, and return for the conversion of their country, after they be found fit, which is always after their studies. The Jesuits having charge of these seminary-youths put out the best wits and rarest judgements for their own order.<sup>27</sup>

Abernethy was one of those "best wits" who left the Scots College within months of entering it rather than stay to become a secular or seminary priest: the brief entry in the College register, "Factus deinde Sacerdos Societas Jesu"<sup>28</sup> ("Then he became a priest in the Society of Jesus") gives little idea of the demanding years which lay ahead. At the end of them he was considered fit to play the part of missionary to Scotland and something more. Abernethy must already have been a man of some stature within the Order when he made his return to Britain in 1632, since he was chosen to approach Charles I's Catholic queen, Henrietta Maria. This was just after the foundation stones were laid of what became the Inigo Jones chapel in the grounds of Somerset House,<sup>29</sup> and there were hopes that Charles, who attended, was about to extend a general toleration to his wife's co-religionists. The possibilities were set forth in a Jesuit "relation" of the time:

At the end of September Father Thomas Abernethy arrived from France. He passed through London on his way, where he had much conversation with the most serene Queen of England on the subject of the suffering of the Catholics in Scotland, and suggested a plan of obtaining from the King some approach to freedom and toleration, which she most kindly undertook to further. There seemed to be a dawn of hope for the Catholics, a report having been spread that the King was about to visit

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> T. Abernethy, "Account of the popish government in Scotland", in R. Wodrow, *The History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland*, i (Glasgow, 1829), 97.

<sup>28</sup> Spalding, *Scots Colleges*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> M. J. Havran, *The Catholics in Caroline England* (Oxford, 1962), 59.

Scotland, but it soon vanished again. . . . The persecution has accordingly continued its old course.<sup>30</sup>

This annual report from Father John Leslie (unusually long in its detailed account of the persecution) implies that Abernethy continued his journey to Scotland, where a marriage alliance had just been concluded between two leading Catholic families: Huntly's daughter to a son of the earl of Angus. This is confirmed by a reference to his passing through Douai on a return journey from Rome.<sup>31</sup> Much later, in warning the Greyfriars congregation of papal aggression, Abernethy spoke of this trip to Rome: "I know more than any Protestant in Scotland of this businesse, for I was imployed in it, the year of God 1632, and gave in (among other points of my commission) a petition to the same Congregation in Rome".<sup>32</sup> The impression comes across of long diplomatic journeys by a man close to "the pope and his conclave": Abernethy was a spy in possession of secrets when he arrived home. Five years later he was to tell all, including the customary stages of a priest's induction to mission work:

They get their patent letters from their congregation or their general, if they be of any order, to go to their country [meaning particular mission or district] furnished with two suits of apparel, all their church apparel and necessaries thereto, and two, three, four or five hundred crowns, as they have favour and are thought worthy for their vocation. Next to come to Douay, where Mr William Leslie superior there gives them some books out of the mission's bibliothek there, and marks to know and be known of their fellows and country: whence they depart, changing their name always.<sup>33</sup>

The changing of names places one problem in the way of writing an accurate history of the mission to Scotland. Some of the priests whom Abernethy lists are shadowy figures but most can be verified from other sources, in particular William Leslie as a leading figure based at Douai and George Con from Artrochy in Buchan, described by Abernethy as "one of our Countriemen, who advised them to set their whole minds for the perversion of England".<sup>34</sup> Con was stationed at the royal court in London from 1636 with the purpose of winning over Charles I. He was well thought of, and only an untimely death deprived him of a

<sup>30</sup> Forbes Leith, *Memoirs*, 119.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver, *Collections*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Abernethie, *Abjuration*, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Wodrow, *Sufferings*, 98.

<sup>34</sup> Abernethie, *Abjuration*, 45.



cardinal's hat.<sup>35</sup> Another significant figure was William Christie, chaplain to the marquis of Huntly and superior of the Jesuits in Scotland, whom Abernethy seems to have disliked since his description is that of "a very timorous but subtile fellow".<sup>36</sup> The former Jesuit apologised to the Greyfriars congregation for his limited knowledge of mission priests: "Excuse me if I know not their names, for we came from several parts at several times. . . . [There were] two others, one Mr Duncan a parson, *alias* Macpherson in Scotland, but unknown to me where they reside."<sup>37</sup>

The established Kirk had its own records on these emissaries of counter-Reformation, including Abernethy and four other priests who featured in evidence laid against an ecclesiastical delinquent living a few miles from Rothiemay:

The same day compeared Robert Gordoune of Cowdraine, and confessed he had not communicated in the church of Gartlye these four years bygone, neither resorted to the church for hearing of the word. And being required to purge himself, by his oath, of the receipt of priests, receiving of the sacrament from them, and in particular from Mr. Thomas Blackhall, Mr. John Smyth, Father Crystie, Mr. Thomas Abernethye, Father Robisone . . . he refused.<sup>38</sup>

It is easy to see why the burn above Culdrain in the parish of Gartly was named (and remains on modern maps) Priest's Water. For some reason connected with the duplicity of the times Robert Gordon, the man who was summoned, is elsewhere described as the "alledged" factor to James Gordon of Rothiemay.<sup>39</sup> Taking the four priests in turn, Thomas Blackhall is listed in error for the man who became chaplain to the widowed countess of Aboyne, Gilbert Blackhall, who made a regular circuit of Catholic houses at Grandholm, Schivas, Artrochy, Cruden, Craig and Cairnborrow, the last of these close to Culdrain. William Christie preceded him at Aboyne. Father Robisone, seems to be Thomas Robb (or "Robe") who left Scotland for London and then Douai during the uproar associated with the National Covenant, and John Smith operated in Aberdeen under the name of Gray.<sup>40</sup> The reference establishes in a precise way that Thomas Abernethy spent part of his time in Scotland close to home, supporting the more general

<sup>35</sup> C. M. Hibbard, *Charles I and the Popish Plot* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 38-71.

<sup>36</sup> Wodrow, *Sufferings*, 97.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Spalding, *Strathbogie*, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Shearer, *Rothiemay*, 15.

<sup>40</sup> J. F. S. Gordon, *Scotichronicon: the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland after the Reformation* (Aberdeen, 1847), 616.



public confession: “I have sinned, employing my wits and travels to seduce Gods elect the space of two or three years, for the most part in the North amongst my friends, in and about Aberdeene, Elgin and Bamff; as likewise Cathnes, where I lived more as an yeare”.<sup>41</sup> He also mentions being at “Ardestie” in Angus at a house belonging to George Gordon of Gight, whose hospitality to a relation by marriage was to cost him dear: “Ardressie” on the southern exposed flank of the Gordon network was plundered in 1640 and its laird, “a seiklie tender man”, arrested “because he was ane Papist and outstander aganes the good cause”.<sup>42</sup> The property has disappeared without trace.

Just as Gilbert Blackhall answered to the titles of priest and chamberlain (as well as captain of the castle) to the countess of Aboyne<sup>43</sup> so Thomas Abernethy took on a dual rôle when leaving Strathbogie for his particular mission in the far north of Scotland. He explains this in terms of the normal stratagems of concealment adopted by priests: “They go abroad as gentlemen or merchants, thereafter any other dexterity they please to use, or functions for their own ends: and so I was chamberlain and bailie in Caithness for my lord Berrydale”.<sup>44</sup> The east coast of Scotland between Dornoch and John o’ Groats has not conventionally been associated with attempts at counter-Reformation, but there was certainly an early post-Reformation Catholic phase which started in 1581 when the leader of the English Jesuits, Edward Persons, identified the earl of Caithness as one of a group of Scottish nobles who would receive chaplains, “on condition only that we do not put them to any expense”.<sup>45</sup> The earl of Sutherland was briefly imprisoned at St Andrews in 1614 for adhering to the old religion. His mother, a Huntly Gordon, was permitted by James VI to have mass in her household, “provided that shoe wold not harbour nor receipt any Jesuits”.<sup>46</sup> Near what was to be the end of the Catholic phase two boys from Sutherland, John Innes and Gilbert Gordon, were sent to Douai in 1629 and 1632.<sup>47</sup>

Although both of the leading families inclined towards Catholicism there was continual friction between Caithness and Sutherland in the early seventeenth century. A catalogue of

<sup>41</sup> Abernethie, *Abjuration*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Spalding, *Memorials*, i, 268.

<sup>43</sup> Blackhall, *Brieffe Narration*, 67.

<sup>44</sup> Wodrow, *Sufferings*, 98.

<sup>45</sup> W. Forbes Leith, *Narratives of Scottish Catholics under Mary Stuart and James VI* (Edinburgh, 1885), 172.

<sup>46</sup> R. Gordon, *A Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland* (Edinburgh, 1813), 411.

<sup>47</sup> Spalding, *Scots Colleges*, 24, 26.

violence and betrayal on the borders of the two shires at Strathtully and Strathnaver draws attention to a Highland/Lowland dimension in the region's troubled politics, but the unstable character of the earl of Caithness was more important. His eldest son lord Berriedale, Thomas Abernethy's future employer, spent five years in an Edinburgh prison on account of his father's debts and was only released in 1623 on agreeing to take part in an expedition which would call him to account. The earl of Caithness fled and Berriedale took his father's place in this debt-ridden corner of Scotland: in the rôle of chamberlain or factor Abernethy was to be responsible for collecting some of the debts.

He was not without powerful local connections outside the Berriedale household, since John Abernethy, bishop of Caithness, was certainly a relation and probably his uncle. It is worth noting that the bishop's son William was married to the daughter of John Sinclair of Ulbster. He in turn had been one of the two Protestant tutors imposed on the marquis of Huntly's household at the time of his act of conformity to James VI's episcopal Kirk. In further illustration of family networks and religious ambivalence, William Sinclair, future lord Berriedale, was brought up in that same household at Bog of Gight. Berriedale's mixed religious upbringing—Protestant tutor, Jesuit chaplain—was similar to what his own Jesuit chaplain appears to have experienced at Rothiemay.

As the leading churchman of Caithness John Abernethy had a reputation for moderation in the spirit of the Aberdeen Doctors.<sup>48</sup> Shortly before being raised to the episcopate he wrote *A Christian and Heavenly Treatise, containing Physicke for the Soule* (1615) and he was later to argue against the imposition of Laud's High Church of England liturgy on Scotland (in contrast to his neighbour the bishop of Ross who was a strong supporter of the policy). The bishop's residence was at Scrabster during Thomas Abernethy's time in Caithness, although the ruined cathedral of the diocese was at Dornoch. He had contrived to regain a legal right to the feu lands of his bishopric, so that prior to 1623 the earl "continually annoyed the bishop's servants and tenants".<sup>49</sup> The land factor has been stressed by a local historian:

The puzzle of such royalist-hearted men as Lord Reay, William Innes of Sandside, and James Sinclair of Murkle, becoming enthusiastic Covenanters is explained at once by the fact that by far the greater part of the land of all three was to be claimed by the Protestant bishops as belonging to the sees of Orkney and Caithness. The establishment of Episcopacy would stop

<sup>48</sup> D. MacMillan, *The Aberdeen Doctors* (London, 1909).

<sup>49</sup> G. Browne, *A History of the Highlands* (Glasgow, 1838), i, 279.

them, or they would at least be reduced to the position of being heavily rented bishops' tenants. Three-fourths of the earldom of Caithness might have thus been recovered from the actual possessors. These were sufficient motives for hard fighting. . . .<sup>50</sup>

The death of the dowager countess of Sutherland in 1628 coincided with a new era in northern ecclesiastical politics. In that year Charles I took the decision to act against Catholics on a national front, and this had a considerable effect on the region when the privy council asked the young earl of Sutherland (who had just attained his majority) to remove from the office of sheriff-depute Sir Alexander Gordon of Navidale, a "known Papist". Also in 1629 the council asked the king "to give commission to the Earl of Seaforth, for persute of the Earl of Caithness, who is ane excommunicate Papist".<sup>51</sup> Lord Berriedale for his part was warned sternly for failing to ensure that William Abernethy, the bishop's son, received his ecclesiastical dues at Hallkirk. Berriedale's debts meant that he was still firmly in the grip of Edinburgh merchants, and they now put pressure through the privy council on his father who was once again back in Caithness. In 1630 this forced the pair of them to at least an appearance of surrender on the religious issue. The earl agreed "to caus his lordships whole familie conforme themselffes and become obedient to the voice of the Kirk. . . . And forder his lordship is become bound and obleist never to receave nor intertaine anie Jesuits, seminarie preists nor traffiquing Papists heerafter . . . under the pane of ane thowsand pounds".<sup>52</sup>

Protestantism began to be established in earnest. In 1633 the bishop's son William Abernethy was transferred from the deprivations of Hallkirk, where revenue had proved hard to collect, to become first minister of Wick. Religious conservatism still found forms of expression, however. In the same year Thurso was made a burgh of barony in lord Berriedale's favour, and it was stipulated that an annual market should be held on "the Feast of the Blessed Virgin, commonly called Our Lady";<sup>53</sup> but this may have signified little more than the traditional nature of the market. All in all, Abernethy's arrival in 1634 could hardly have happened at a more difficult time for a missionary priest. Even the elements seemed to conspire against the success of his enterprise. The poor harvest of the previous year together with the absence of fish, usually abundant round these shores, caused a terrible famine which he, like other educated men of the day, might readily have ascribed to

<sup>50</sup> Innes of Sandside, *Northern Ensign* (1884), quoted in Craven, *Caithness*, 78.

<sup>51</sup> *Records of Privy Council*, 2nd series, iii, 249.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 481.

<sup>53</sup> Craven, *Caithness*, 69.



the wrath of God.<sup>54</sup> According to local tradition, “many of the poorer sort of people were reduced to such extremity that, to satisfy the gnawings of hunger, they killed their very dogs and ate them, and greedily devoured sea ware and whatever would support life. Multitudes died in the open field, and it is said that many ran into the sea and drowned themselves.”<sup>55</sup>

It is not clear what lord Berriedale’s intentions were at the point of Abernethy’s arrival. A correspondence with Father Christie at Bog of Gight continued during his year in Caithness, but the leading man of the region was soon to emerge on the Protestant side. In 1634 Berriedale was named justice of the peace in a list which included all the parish ministers of Caithness. That is hardly conclusive evidence of a change of heart, but it turned out to be a first step away from Catholicism. When the issue came to a head four years later he “warmly espoused the popular cause”<sup>56</sup> being named as one of five commissioners appointed to get the National Covenant suscribed throughout the kingdom. He was at Inverness in April 1638: “There repared to the toune the master of Beridale, accompanied with fourtie gentlemen of his freinds and vassalls, notwithstanding they were earnestlie dealt with to stay at home”. Some but by no means all of the leading men of the north agreed to sign the Covenant: “They resolved to go to the parochie church of the toune and subscryve. . . . The master of Beridale, to provocke the gentrie of the other shires, haveing a roll of the gentlemen of Caithness, called them by their name to subscryve.”<sup>57</sup> The earl of Sutherland went the same way and was actually the first man to sign the National Covenant in Edinburgh, according to Gordon of Rothiemay. Later he was to lead its armies in the field, notably against Montrose when he was finally defeated at Carbisdale in Sutherland.

The simplest explanation of Thomas Abernethy’s rejection of the Roman Catholic Church, therefore, is that he followed the lead of his employer lord Berriedale. It is also possible, however, that the influence was in the other direction or at least mutual. Abernethy gave up his position in the summer of 1635, at the same time abandoning his priesthood and Catholic faith, and nothing so crude as a new set of religious and political circumstances is suggested in his own account. That account may be suspect but so also are the charges which were freely laid against him. Inevitably attempts were made to undermine Abernethy’s character after his change of sides, and it must be doubted whether a central allegation had any substance.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971).

<sup>55</sup> Craven, *Caithness*, 72.

<sup>56</sup> Calder, *Caithness*, 162.

<sup>57</sup> John, earl of Rothes, *A Relation of Proceedings concerning the Affairs of the Kirk of Scotland, from August 1637 to July 1638* (Edinburgh, 1830), 106-07.



Gordon says that “begetting a mayde with chyld he was deposed by his Superiors and deserted them”<sup>58</sup> but this is such a common charge as to be treated with caution. It is only partially supported by the superiors themselves (“this wicked apostate took a wife—I should rather call her a concubine”) and the main point of Jesuit condemnation is more general: “He left the faith and our Society together on account of great crimes which he had committed”.<sup>59</sup> What great crimes could Abernethy have committed in Caithness?

He was accused by Catholics of having fraternised with the enemy. According to Thomas Gray of Schivas, briefly back from France, “No honest man had a good opinion of that man, for quhill I was last in the countrey he frequented most heretiques, went to heretiq preachings and lived wt scandal”.<sup>60</sup> But in the changing circumstances of Caithness the Jesuit had diplomatic reason enough to adopt an ecumenical policy even if he had not intended to change sides. Presumably the “heretiq preachings” he frequented included those of his relations at Wick and Scrabster. At another level the following set of personal observations suggests an inner motivation:

I was plunged in idolatrie my self, and drawing others dayly to the same precipice, taking up the dueties and customes of Caithnes as Chamerlaine. . . . Concerning my life and conversation, I submit myself to the censure of these, both Protestants and Papists, with whom I lived at that time, and to the Letters which the Superior receaved in my favour from the noble man with whom I lived. . . . It fell out some three years ago (or thereabout) in Caithnes, that after I had ended my ordinarie superstitions, as Breviarie, Masse, Beeds, and suchlike trash, I used commonly to read a chapter of the Bible. . . . I was convicted in my minde to define Poperie to bee a superstitious masse of policie, under pretext of religion.<sup>61</sup>

The “ordinarie superstitions” would have been the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius; he mentions elsewhere the dispensation which was granted to educated Catholics like himself from the Vatican ban on reading Scripture—available to literate English-speaking Catholics in the Douai version of 1609; and the sliding political situation of Caithness may well have persuaded Abernethy to see his adopted faith as “policie, under pretext of religion”. He uses some of the imagery of Saul on the road to Damascus (there was a “light”, and he found more suspicion than acceptance among

<sup>58</sup> Gordon, *Scots Affairs*, 44.

<sup>59</sup> Forbes Leith, *Memoirs*, i, 202.

<sup>60</sup> M. V. Hay, *The Blairs Papers, 1603-1660* (London, 1929), 121.

<sup>61</sup> Abernethie, *Abjuration*, 16, 33, 21.

his new co-religionists) but this was not the sort of conversion which led at once to a purer life: "I have sinned; by not living these three years bygone (for so long time have I beene a seeming member of the true reformed Church of God) as became a true and sincere reformed Christian".<sup>62</sup>

"Three years bygone" implies that he was secretly received into the established episcopal Church in 1635, almost certainly by one or other of his Caithness relations. Abernethy is at pains to establish that he was not expelled from the Society of Jesus and the evidence supports this. No greater "crimes" were ever laid against him, even in Jesuit correspondence, than going to Protestant churches and carelessness in matters of security: "I was never reproved of the Superiour, or any other, all the time I was in the countrey, but for going to the churches, in Scotland; and exposing myself and them to danger, by going openlie thorow the countrie". The account of his leave-taking convinces by its detail: "If they had cast me out, they had not entertained me so kindlie at my departure out of Scotland as they did, for then the Superiour gave me Letters to go for Douay, and there teach the youths of the College their controversies and heare their confessions, moneys to carry me there, and three of his Jesuits after kinde entertainment in this Town [Edinburgh] convoyed me a myle of my journey. These were signes of love, and not of outcasting".<sup>63</sup>

But the new novice master failed to report to headquarters at Douai. Instead he resumed his former military career in Germany and Poland, where he spoke with some of that country's many Jesuits without revealing his background.<sup>64</sup> When Abernethy's desertion became known to Father Christie his expulsion was carried out *in absentia*: "Since I went out of Scotland last, they could not cast me out of their order, because since I was never in any house of theirs, nor kepted companie with them. And as for my life and conversation ever since, I am sorrie, it was not so good as became a reformed Christian, yet whatsoever it was they had nothing to doe with it; and there be many worthie Cavaliers both at home and abroad, in whose companie I have lived this time bygone, who know that my life was neither scandalous to my profession, shamefull to my Nation, or any wayes disgracefull to my particular calling of a Souldier."<sup>65</sup> The claim that Abernethy was chaplain to the marquis of Huntly in 1636<sup>66</sup> is thus wrong on several counts.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>66</sup> Forbes Leith, *Memoirs*, i, 202; Hibbard, *Charles I*, 113.

He appears to have served under the Alexander Leslie who eventually led a Scottish army into England, coming home with him in the early summer of 1638. The two cannons and 2,000 muskets which the disbanded troops were given by the Queen of Sweden have been credited with making possible the stand taken against royal authority.<sup>67</sup> John Row's contemporary account fails to acknowledge Abernethy's military interlude and implies a much later conversion than actually occurred: "About this time, one Mr Thomas Abernathie, a Jesuit, heareing of God's wonderfull work here in his native cuntrey, wakened in conscience, came home, and presenting himself to The Tables, intreated, for Christ's sake, the favour of subscryveing the Covenant, very humblie confessing his fearfull apostasie; and in token of his ingenuitie, he revealed all the Popeish plotts aganis Scotland, and the Popeish government in Scotland, and gave his advise for taking order with them".<sup>68</sup> Several arrests were to be made on the basis of information passed on by the ex-Jesuit, who advised his Presbyterian allies to concentrate on lairds rather than priests. As already noted his relations were not spared.

Abernethy appears to have been ordained as a Protestant minister almost as soon as he returned. The evidence for this is not in any church records, incomplete as these are for the period, but comes from the testimonies of Gordon (who states that the "benefice" followed, and was no doubt contingent upon, his public abjuration) and Robert Baillie, principal of Glasgow University. Ministry is also implied by Abernethy's Greyfriars resolution to "labour now in Christs vineyard for the edification of Christs mysticall body the Church".<sup>69</sup> He had support from his army commander and also from lord Berriedale, now a leading figure on the Presbyterian side, plus the fact that he was willing to barter information for an ecclesiastical living. According to Principal Baillie, Abernethy was one of four ministers who negotiated with the privy council when it sat at Dalkeith in June 1638. The group's leader was Andrew Ramsay, who later that summer introduced the former Jesuit to his kirk of Greyfriars. According to the printed version he did so at considerable length but added nothing to the evidence on Abernethy's movements or motivations.<sup>70</sup> Ramsay was a Kincardine man who had begun his ministry at Arbuthnott. Rejected by episcopal Aberdeen for the principalship of Marischal College, he was the first Edinburgh

<sup>67</sup> T. A. Fischer, *The Scots in Germany* (Edinburgh, 1902), 107.

<sup>68</sup> J. Row, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland from the year 1558 to August 1637* (Edinburgh, 1842), 498.

<sup>69</sup> Abernethie, *Abjuration*, 18.

<sup>70</sup> A. Ramsay, *A Warning to come out of Babylon* (Edinburgh, 1638).

minister to refuse the new liturgy.<sup>71</sup> Some points emerge from the meeting with privy council which clarify the northern political situation: "Huntly is of good discourse, but neither trusted by king or countrey; his power also is contemptible in this cause: many of his name hes subscryved; himself and sundrie of them are over burdened with debt. . . . Now most of the Gordouns depends on Sutherland."<sup>72</sup> Ramsay and Abernethy were jointly made responsible for ensuring that all "the Noblemen Counsellors that were in toune" received a written invitation to sign the Covenant,<sup>73</sup> and Abernethy's last recorded contribution to the ecclesiastical revolution has him helping to draw up charges against the discredited representatives of "prelacy", in particular John Guthrie, bishop of Moray: "He was a prettie dancer, as Mr Thomas Abernethie can testify. At his daughter's brydell he danced in his shirt."<sup>74</sup>

There are no further references to Abernethy in a church context but the fact that a reprint of *Abjuration of Poperie* was published in 1641 implies that he was still well regarded by his fellow ministers at that time. Catholics believed that he had been lured by a "heretic temple with a rich stipend"<sup>75</sup> and the local historian of Rothiemay adds (without evidence or detail) that he went to a charge in the west of Scotland.<sup>76</sup> Nor was anything further recorded about the "mayde with childe", concubine or wife, although as a reformed minister seeking to distance himself from celibate priesthood it would certainly have been appropriate for him to have a wife. When invited to impute failures of celibacy to members of the Jesuit Order, however, the worst that Abernethy could bring himself to say was that "they are young, noble and gentle, quick witted youths for the most part, having thereafter great notice of sins by auricular confessions and almost hourly conference with women of all conditions, both publickly and privately". He asked his Greyfriars audience to judge "what they are, or what they may be".<sup>77</sup> Those members of the "devouter sex" who surrounded Abernethy at the end of his address can hardly have refrained from speculating about him.

Principal Baillie, a relatively objective witness of the Greyfriars scene, was able to summarise the main points of substance while incidentally acting as a character witness for Abernethy: "After all

<sup>71</sup> Scott, *Fasti*, i, 70.

<sup>72</sup> R. Baillie, *Letters and Journals* (Edinburgh, 1841-42), 82.

<sup>73</sup> Rothes, *Relation*, 143.

<sup>74</sup> Spalding, *Memorials*, i, 201.

<sup>75</sup> Forbes Leith, *Memoirs*, i, 202.

<sup>76</sup> Shearer, *Rothiemay*, 9.

<sup>77</sup> Abernethie, *Abjuration*, 28.



our diligence to try, we can find no evidence of hypocrisy in the man. He shoves us many things: . . . that there is eighteen priests at least ever in Scotland; he gave their names and abode: he tells us that, in England there will be above six thousand: that at London there will be above three hundred masses sung every Sabbath; that he knew, on a six years since, when he was last at Rome a conclusion pact in the congregation *De Propaganda Fide* for to use the means to draw the Church of England to that of Rome, but not to mell no further with our Scottish Church than an association with England, upon hopes, by this conformitie alone to gain us fully by tyme.”<sup>78</sup>

The Catholic historian Malcolm Hay has castigated Abernethy’s account for its “ridiculous stories against the Jesuits”.<sup>79</sup> The suggestion of 6,000 priests in England is certainly much exaggerated: estimates by historians have ranged from 750 to 950.<sup>80</sup> The number of masses which Abernethy imagined to be “sung” in London on Sundays was clearly influenced by his impressions of Henrietta Maria’s household, containing as it did at least twelve priests and a bishop.<sup>81</sup> But the Scottish evidence is more reliable. His identification of houses containing priests is sometimes obscure but “Pitalpie”, “Achigore” and “Carneo”<sup>82</sup> merely testify to changing place-names. The number of priests in Scotland is exaggerated slightly through the eagerness of his hearers: Abernethy’s estimate of sixteen to eighteen priests becomes Baillie’s “eighteen at least ever in Scotland”. The sums of up to five hundred crowns given to priests when they passed Douai do appear high for a mission which was chronically under-funded, as Hay himself emphasised,<sup>83</sup> but there is no doubt that the Roman Catholic Church was making a particular effort to recover Britain this time, and large sums might well have been considered “worthy for their vocation” in the case of Jesuit diplomats like Abernethy. Otherwise his general account of Church strategy is fair and accurate. Belief in the ex-Jesuit’s integrity is strengthened by the fact that he denied (though in private) some of the rumours attributed to him: “There went out in his name reports of Canterbury intercourse of letters with the Pope, with the contriving of our Scottish Liturgie at Rome; bot when I posed him on these, he denied his knowledge of any such matters; albeit he confessed to

<sup>78</sup> Baillie, *Letters*, 102.

<sup>79</sup> Hay, *Blairs Letters*, 121.

<sup>80</sup> J. Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850* (London, 1975), 422; Havran, *Caroline England*, 80.

<sup>81</sup> Havran, *Caroline England*, 49.

<sup>82</sup> Wodrow, *Sufferings*, 98.

<sup>83</sup> M. V. Hay, “Too little and too late”, *Innes Review*, vi, 1956.

me some state-passages which might have been prejudicial enough to him if they had gone abroad".<sup>84</sup> Abernethy's *Abjuration* was freely used in the propaganda war which drew England into conflict with Charles I in support of the Scottish Covenanters but this passage establishes that more was done in his name than by his intention. It also answers Peter Donald's charge that Abernethy invented the "pasquinade" of a correspondence between George Con and Archbishop Laud and took up this theme "with a vengeance in 1638".<sup>85</sup> As Abernethy plainly acknowledged, Con was not in favour of Laud confronting his "stubborn" countrymen with a ritualistic liturgy and urged nothing more sinister than the "mutual intelligence" between England and Rome,<sup>86</sup> which was in any case implied by his own appointment. He was, however, actively conspiring with Richelieu for bulding up a stronger presence of Catholic clergy north of the border in exchange for mercenary troops to be used in the French interest.<sup>87</sup> Con also played a leading rôle in assembling Catholic troops from Scotland and Ulster for deployment against the Covenanters.<sup>88</sup>

Abernethy's return to the north preceded his involvement as a key figure in Montrose's army. The recently extended list of surviving copies of the National Covenant includes a surprising number which were signed in the north as "striking testimony to the covenanters' success in gaining signatures in an area where enthusiasm for their cause was limited".<sup>89</sup> Abernethy subscribed a northern copy which passed into the keeping of the Frasers of Philorth, the family which gained the Abernethy title of Saltoun by a seventeenth-century marriage (despite an unpressed but superior claim by Alexander Abernethy of Auchencloich and Mayen).<sup>90</sup> The document, dated 21 November 1638, carries the names of fourteen nobles and the remainder of its hundred signatures are of lairds and ministers, mostly from Aberdeenshire. Thomas Abernethy appears as "sometyme Jesuit but now penitent sinner and ane unworthie member of the true reformed church of god in Scotland".<sup>91</sup> His third signing of the Covenant was in December of 1638 at the close of the Glasgow Assembly.

Abernethy was with the army of the Covenant in the summer

<sup>84</sup> Baillie, *Letters*, 102.

<sup>85</sup> P. Donald, *An Uncounselled King: Charles I and the Scottish Troubles, 1637-1641* (Cambridge, 1990), 180.

<sup>86</sup> Abernethie, *Abjuration*, 45.

<sup>87</sup> Donald, *Uncounselled King*, 181.

<sup>88</sup> Hibbard, *Charles I*, 94-101.

<sup>89</sup> Stevenson, "National Covenant", 260.

<sup>90</sup> C. Fraser-Mackintosh, *Antiquarian Notes: Families and Places in the Highlands* (Stirling, 1913), 290.

<sup>91</sup> Aberdeen University Library, Fraser of Philorth Papers, Bundle 334.

of 1639 when it brought north-east Scotland to heel, and making life difficult for his former associates: two men were clapped in irons in the dungeon of Dunnottar Castle “be the meanis of ane recanting Jesuit callit Abirnethie”.<sup>92</sup> Abernethy’s finest hour as man of action came in June of that year at the Bridge of Dee, just south of Aberdeen. Montrose is generally credited with enabling the bridge to be stormed by his feint to take cavalry across upriver, but the artillery training of Abernethy as a veteran of the German wars was also significant: “The enemies had fortified the bridge of Dee, and lay on the other shoare under sconces [or earthworks] with their musquets and horsemen: we resolved to have the bridge on all hazards. It was a desperate piece of service; none more stout, and full of good directions at it, than Jesuit Abernethie, by the playing of the great ordinance on the bridge.”<sup>93</sup> There can be little doubt that the great ordinance included the Swedish cannons which Leslie’s army had brought home with them.

In the autumn of 1639 lord Berriedale died of “spotted fever” and was buried in the Abbey Church at Holyrood.<sup>94</sup> Although deprived of his first patron “Jesuit” Abernethy was still alive and prospering in 1642, according to a report of his former Order,<sup>95</sup> but by then he had ceased to be a public figure. The absence of further comment from the Presbyterian side suggests that there was some truth in the charges of moral failure which were laid against him, not only by the Catholics, who had been most seriously hurt by Abernethy’s action but also by Episcopalians like Gordon and, at a later date, Bishop Burnet: “His story had a ready belief, as well as a welcome hearing; though the lightness and weakness of the man became afterwards so visible that small account was made of him or his story”.<sup>96</sup>

Abernethy’s story was near enough the mark, but the man himself was suspect to all parties in that tumultuous age. More than most he had reason to be aware of the range of party opinion. It included Presbyterians who were unsure of him, Catholics who reviled him, and Episcopalians—who merit particular emphasis at the last since religious ambivalence must take serious account of the middle ground. Supporters of what once more became the established Church in 1660 were strong in north-east Scotland during the first third of the seventeenth century, and Abernethy chose his words carefully for these “not Covenanters”, especially the six Aberdeen Doctors who represented the city’s churches and colleges and argued, with considerable intellectual distinction, for compromise. Their tradition,

<sup>92</sup> Spalding, *Memorials*, i, 201.

<sup>93</sup> Baillie, *Letters*, 222.

<sup>94</sup> Calder, *Caithness*, 163.

<sup>95</sup> Forbes Leith, *Memorials*, i, 202.

<sup>96</sup> G. Burnet, *Memoirs of the Hamiltons*, i (London, 1677), 83.

though militantly Jacobite in politics, was to become that of religious Quietism.<sup>97</sup> The willingness of the bishop of Caithness to sign the Covenant before the close of 1638 was “weall tackne” by the Glasgow Assembly,<sup>98</sup> and the oblique reference at the start of the following passage may have been intended to exempt John Abernethy from the sins of his fellow bishops:

To you not Covenanters I say that, of your Bishops I never saw any but one, neither would I mourn albeit I never saw more of them in Scotland. . . . I am certainly perswaded that yee would [i.e., should] all subscribe that worthie Covenant, before that yee went out of this Church, or else I would hold you as internall papists. . . . But some will say, that there be great doctors not Covenanters, and wherefore may they not likewise stand out as well as these learned men. I answer first, that they are but few, and to my judgement (for I have discoursed with some of them) not the learnedest of the kingdome, brought up in a town which was never yet cleansed from poperie, and where I have seene an hundred at Masse in one time, within these few yeeres: Secondly, these Doctors suppose they be both good and learned (as I know some of them are) shall not answer for thee in that great day [of judgement]. . . . Thirdly, what if these Doctors would maintain poperie, and hinder a reformation, as their predecessors have done, would thou follow?<sup>99</sup>

Despite his recognition of “good and learned” qualities of these Scottish Episcopalians, Abernethy rejected their position with vigour: “I was never, am not, neither ever (God-willing) shall bee a lukewarm Laodicean”.<sup>100</sup> For him the only alternative to counter-Reformation Catholicism was thorough-going Calvinism. In between the 1638 and 1641 editions of his *Abjuration*, a curious pamphlet was produced by an Anglican called John Corbett in which, pretending to be a Jesuit, he ironically congratulated the Calvinists on their success.<sup>101</sup> It has since been argued that Calvinists and Jesuits at opposite ends of the theological spectrum resembled each other in logic, zeal and temperament.<sup>102</sup> Abernethy remained consistent in all of these. Beyond the interest of his personal story, however, Thomas Abernethy stands out as a unique symbol of shifting loyalty to church and state during one of Scotland’s formative periods.

<sup>97</sup> G. D. Henderson, *Mystics of the North-East* (Aberdeen, 1934)

<sup>98</sup> Spalding, *Memorialls*, ii, 131.

<sup>99</sup> Abernethie, *Abjuration*, 43, 44, 42.

<sup>100</sup> Abernethie, *Abjuration*, 37.

<sup>101</sup> Lysimachus Nicanor (John Corbett), *Epistle Congratulatorie to the Covenanters of Scotland* (London, 1640).

<sup>102</sup> D. Ogg, *Europe in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1925), 89.